

# DADS AT A DISTANCE

## *Incarcerated Dads*

Ideas for Strengthening Relationships Between Dads and Kids.

Creating and maintaining a positive relationship with your child is challenging when you are in prison or jail. Get yourself ready for the next interaction with your child. Work on making yourself physically healthier, mentally stimulated, more employable and self-controlled.

- **Learn job skills.** Take advantage of any work program you can get into. Learn as much as you can about how the job is done, how it relates to other jobs, get as good as you can at whatever task you are assigned. Look for additional skill development opportunities.
- **Get physically fit.** Activity to build strength and endurance will also help your body create the chemicals it needs to combat depression.
- **Clean and straight.** Get into a treatment program to deal with any addictions. Get help to work through the emotional pain that gets you craving a fix.
- **Focus on your strengths.** What have you already done for your child? Have you provided for food, clothing, housing needs in the past? Financial support recently?
- **Forgive yourself** and everyone else you have blamed for getting you into the situation you are in right now. We all make mistakes. Kids don't need perfect dads. It's the wise father who works to not make the same mistake twice.
- **List healthy ways to deal with your anger**, such as deep breathing, physical exercise. Do not hurt yourself or another person. You hurt your child when you do that.
- **Make a list of important values**, characteristics and qualities you want your child to have as an adult. Pick one value and write your thoughts about why that value is important and what it would look like if your child had it. Describe attitudes and behavior that would reflect that value in someone's life.
- **Write a short note to your child.** Fill it with all the love you can think of. Date it. Save it for the future. Write another one every month on the day that matches your child's birthday.
- **Look hard at your decisions up to this point.** Your child's mother and other relatives are skeptical about your involvement in your child's life because you broke a rule of society designed to keep people safe, healthy and able to get along. Make up your mind to **change one attitude or behavior** that will get you closer to the father image you really want to be. Keep working at it.
- **Listen** to your child's caregiver. Understand that the emotions she brings to you are real but are not yours. Deal with your own emotions before reacting to what she is saying.

Make the most of your visit with your child.

- **Pay attention to your body language.** Stand up and greet them with a handshake or hug. If you have young children get on their level by greeting them on your knees. Avoid having a table or chair between you. Smile!
- **Calm yourself** with a slow, deep breath when you notice your heart beating rapidly. Relax your shoulders and arms by stretching.
- **Smile;** say your child's name warmly.
- **Give your child time and space to get used to you** if he/she is shy. You can begin by telling a story or singing a song.
- **Observe your child's play.** Request some toys to be available such as blocks, balls, dolls, trucks, etc. Let your child start playing with them. Observe and say things like "I see you like the orange truck." "I wonder if the babydoll is hungry." "How high can the blocks be stacked before they fall over?" "I see 3 round balls – a green one, a striped one and a brown football."
- **Get a joke book for kids.** Find four riddles, jokes or questions you can ask on your next phone call or visit. Try one of the *Clean Jokes for Kids* books by Bob Phillips.
- **Tell about** when you learned to ride a bicycle, skateboard, etc.
- **Read together.** Arrange for a book appropriate for your child's age. Practice reading the book out loud before the visit so you are confident of the words. Think of questions you can ask your child about the pictures or characters - "Where is the bird?" "I wonder what (character) will do next." "I see a word that has a 'k' in it, can you find it?"

Research tells us that children with active dads receive benefits that kids without involved fathers don't get. **Children with active dads have** better grades, positive problem solving skills, good health, ability to maintain close friendships, higher levels of empathy and compassion.

**Kids who have involved fathers become adults with** a higher sense of satisfaction with life, more education, higher income, more stable jobs, stronger and longer marriages.

**Involved dads** provide physical care such as feeding, bathing, clothing and general care. They take children to doctor appointments, school conferences, child care, etc. Involved dads play and interact in ways that show love and limits to their children. They know their child's likes, dislikes, and routines. Active dads know the important people in their child's life like friends, teachers, and coaches. They connect with their children on an emotional and spiritual level as well as reconnect with their children after an absence.



For more information on strengthening father-child relationships check out this Website: [www.extension.iastate.edu/dads](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/dads)

Prepared by Kristi Cooper, Family Life Specialist, Iowa State University Extension  
3279 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. Suite 140, Marion, Iowa 52302, 319 377-9839, [kcoop@iastate.edu](mailto:kcoop@iastate.edu), September 2005.

...and Justice for All

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating.